

GOOD WORKS SA: Nonprofits collaborate to support opportunity youth

Jun 14, 2019, 5:00am CDT

Adriana Contreras was drawn to work at Goodwill San Antonio by a mission that goes beyond thrift stores and donation stations: to empower youth and adults who are burdened with life barriers to secure their futures through meaningful employment.

"We believe that work provides dignity and purpose," Contreras, the nonprofit's senior director of youth services, said.

Contreras stresses the needs in San Antonio for education and workforce development, as her hands move to punctuate her words. A particular challenge for San Antonio rests in Bexar County's estimated 36,000 young adults who are disconnected from education systems, the workforce and major social institutions. San Antonio ranked 20th out of 25 of the largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. for having the most youth 16 to 24 who are not working or in school, according to research on disengaged youth conducted by Measure of America.

"What I have come to understand more deeply is the strength, resilience and courage our youth possess," said Contreras. "In some cases, they have overcome immense barriers to pursue their goals, yet somehow, somehow, they persevere. ... They truly are an inspiration. ... They have not given up, and therefore, we as a community should not give up on them."

When Contreras joined Goodwill, she led the logistics to open a re-engagement center for people 16 to 24 who weren't employed or in school. These young people — sometimes referred to as opportunity youth because their disengagement creates a loss of economic opportunity — face limited options for success. As a result, many end up in generational poverty, become part of the criminal justice system, and/or experience homelessness.

While they have aspirations, youth without workforce skills or postsecondary education plans are very unlikely to meet them, Contreras said, especially given that most jobs today and in the future require training and/or credentials beyond a high school degree. She cites figures from a report titled "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth," which said that by age 28, 1% of youth who have been disconnected will earn an associate degree or higher, compared to 36 percent of the general population.

Contreras is encouraged by the city's commitment to combat this issue, opening the NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center in February in the renovated Frank Garrett Multi-Service Center through San Antonio's Department of Human Services, in collaboration with Goodwill San Antonio and Communities In Schools of San Antonio.

The center provides a safe and supportive place focused on re-engaging such young people, with case management to address life barriers that prevent them from fulfilling their educational and career goals, NXT Level Program Manager Melody Ayala said.

"Through the design of targeted interventions and strategies, we're able to focus on the unique needs of opportunity youth," said Ayala, who finds working with these youths incredibly rewarding. "So many barriers exist, including homelessness, unemployment, lack of mental health services and other factors."

Communities In Schools focuses on the social, emotional and mental health experience, while Goodwill provides expertise in job training and educational pathways, Ayala said.



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Melody Ayala is program manager at the NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center, which opened in February in the renovated Frank Garrett Multi-Service Center.

“By combining all of these strengths into one program, these youths receive a comprehensive set of supports to help them achieve their personal goals, build better futures and help them reach success,” she said.

Contreras passionately extols NXT Level’s virtues, saying the city, Goodwill and Communities In Schools are making tremendous impact through the program. Still, she said they can’t do it alone and alludes to the local business community’s collective ability to affect change when it gets behind an effort.

“Give our city’s opportunity youth a chance through an internship, apprenticeship or job shadowing experience,” she said.

“Can you imagine the economic impact on our community if even a small percentage of the 36,000 opportunity youth in San Antonio found an educational and/or career pathway?”

Ayala said there is a social and economic opportunity to strengthen the city by supporting youth who are disconnected yet enthusiastic to contribute to and be part of our vibrant, growing community.

“These young adults are resilient and loyal. ... They simply need the opportunity to realize their potential,” Contreras said. “We owe it to ourselves and our community to pay it forward by offering not a handout — but instead a helping hand.”

Andi Rodriguez’s “Good Works SA” column appears in the second and fourth issues of each month.

Andi Rodriguez
Nonprofit correspondent

<https://www.goodwillsa.org/the-good-news/597-good-works-sa-nonprofits-collaborate-to-support-opportunity-youth>